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U.S. INTELLIGENCE PERFORMANCE AND
THE SEPTEMBER 20, 1984 BEIRUT BOMBING

REPORT
BY THE
PERMANENT SELECT COMMITTEE
ON INTELLIGENCE

October 3, 1984

Background

On September 20, 1984, for the third time in eighteen months, an explosives-laden vehicle, driven by a terrorist, drove up to an American installation in Beirut and detonated. In this incident, two Americans and at least ten Lebanese were killed. The site bombed on September 20 was located in Christian East Beirut. Officially it was the United States Embassy Annex, but it housed the bulk of Americans in the Embassy community. The Annex had been occupied by Embassy personnel on July 31, 1984.

Also on July 31, an 80-man Marine detachment from the Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU), previously engaged in peacekeeping duties in Beirut, was removed from its task of guarding the British Chancery in West Beirut where all U.S. Embassy personnel had been temporarily located since the bombing of the original U.S. Embassy building in April, 1983. The security enhancements for the new Embassy Annex in East Beirut were incomplete at the time of the move. They were still not complete at the time of the bombing.

Methodology

This report concerns itself with intelligence performance related to the above facts. It does not analyze security measures at the Embassy Annex except insofar as intelligence contributed to such measures. Security of embassy facilities is not an intelligence function. It is the responsibility of the Department of State.

The Committee's review of intelligence performance focused on several issues: what intelligence was collected and produced concerning the attack on the Embassy or any other threats to the Embassy; the adequacy of intelligence

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efforts to collect and analyze such material; intelligence contributions relating to other decisions such as the site selection of the Embassy Annex and the withdrawal of the Marine detachment; and the degree to which intelligence assessments were taken into consideration in making crucial decisions on security related to the Embassy bombing.

In its review, the Committee examined all the reporting provided by U.S. intelligence agencies to the State Department and to the Embassy in Beirut that could be said to provide warning of terrorist attack. The Committee examined finished analyses of such reporting as well as any alerts to highlight the terrorist threat. The Committee reviewed the working relationships between the intelligence agencies and State Department officials, the type of support provided to the Ambassador, and asked if any intelligence analyses were provided to officials who made crucial decisions on the Embassy Annex site selection and the withdrawal of the Marine detachment from Beirut.

Lastly, the Committee conducted staff interviews and a detailed hearing concerning the events surrounding this bombing and the intelligence activities described above.

Conclusions

The Committee observes that, intelligence reporting aside, the previous terrorist incidents in Beirut directed against U.S. personnel - the bombing of the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. Marine Barracks - resulted in such great loss of life, both times by vehicles loaded with explosives, that common sense would have indicated that U.S. personnel and installations were likely future

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targets for terrorists. Common sense would also have suggested that terrorists would continue to use vehicular bombs until such time as the U.S. was able to develop adequate defenses against such a threat.

The Committee finds further that the environment in Beirut since the first bombing of the American Embassy in April 1983 had been so hostile to American officials and military personnel, as well as to other members of the diplomatic community and many other elements of Lebanese society, that it could well have been analogized to a war zone. The Committee was told that every member of the Embassy staff and every U.S. official responsible for the security of U.S. Embassy facilities in Beirut should have appreciated the severe nature of the threat to Americans.

The Committee also finds that there were credible reports during the two months prior to the bombing that terrorist groups, in particular radical Shi'ite groups with Iranian connections, were planning attacks against U.S. officials and premises. This reporting was never specific as to time or place but it provided adequate warning that attacks might occur, particularly in light of the overall situation in Beirut. These reports should have heightened and reinforced the concern of all U.S. officials responsible for the safety of the American Embassy personnel in Beirut.

The Committee finds further that intelligence alerts - analytical assessments of all source intelligence - were transmitted to State Department and Defense Department officials and to the Embassy from both the State Department and the Defense Intelligence Agency. Unlike the situation reported by the Long Commission, where intelligence reports on possible attacks on the Marine peacekeeping unit daily inundated the MAU commander, the State and DIA

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alerts highlighted two September threats against American personnel in Beirut. They reflected U.S. intelligence warning of likely terrorist action. The alert process filters out significant from routine reports and accentuates the danger they identify. Within the State Department, intelligence alerts also must be approved by the Office of Security as well as the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Use of the alert mechanism should have gained the direct attention of top State Department and Embassy officials, including security officers, to such likely threats.

The Committee finds that there was an overall intelligence community consensus that a move from the crowded British Chancery location to a new location in Christian East Beirut would be safer, given the fact that the 80-man MAU detachment was to be removed from its guard duties for the Chancery. The Committee has discovered no intelligence threat assessments of the likely result of the removal of the MAU detachment nor does it appear that any intelligence agency was tasked by the State Department or any other authority to produce such an assessment.

The Committee finds that the DIA security team which visited Beirut between July 14 and July 18, 1984 to assess the security of Defense Attache office facilities found the threat to the new U.S. Embassy facilities in both East and West Beirut to be "exceedingly high." This assessment was conveyed to Embassy security officials on July 18 before the security team left Lebanon and to the State Department on its return to the U.S. DIA officials state that State Department officials did not disagree with the DIA assessment. In addition, the DIA assessment refers to other vulnerabilities of the various Embassy facilities in East and West Beirut which also were

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shared with State Department security officials. One such potential vulnerability included the reliability of the recruited local guard force.

The Committee understands that the intelligence community has intelligence which implicates a particular terrorist group as responsible for the bombing attack. Intelligence officials believe that the organization responsible for the attack may have received support from Iran and may be one of several organizations which use the name Islamic Jihad.

Overall, the Committee finds that intelligence performance on the threat related to the bombing was adequate. No specific information was provided about the time and place of the attack, but the Committee is convinced that information of such detail is extremely difficult, often impossible, to obtain. This is because terrorist groups are often small, extremely suspicious and security-conscious. For these reasons, terrorist groups sometimes can be impervious to penetration by U.S. intelligence.

The Committee is convinced, based on its knowledge and review of intelligence budgets for the collection of intelligence on terrorism, that adequate resources are being devoted to this problem worldwide. The Committee has supported budget increases since 1979 reflecting an increased priority for such collection and analytical capability. The Committee is also aware of cooperative efforts within the intelligence community to share and make the best use of intelligence information. The fruits of these efforts may not be seen immediately but, over the long term, the Committee is convinced that the intelligence efforts which it has supported will increase the likelihood of U.S. success against terrorism.

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The Committee concludes that better use of intelligence regarding terrorism could be made. Although State Department officials assured the Committee that intelligence was factored into security decisions, in light of the clear, identifiable nature of the threat in Beirut, the Committee is distressed that intelligence contributions were not given more attention. Those contributions include the alert messages provided by DIA and State, continuous reporting on terrorist threats, reporting on the atmosphere of extreme danger for U.S. diplomats in Beirut and, first and foremost, the analysis of the two prior terrorist bombing attacks on U.S. installations in Beirut. This intelligence portrayed a situation where those responsible for security at U.S. installations in Beirut - both in Washington and on the scene - should have been on full alert and should have taken every precaution possible to thwart just such an attack as occurred. In particular, it is the view of the Committee that the probability of another vehicular bomb attack was so unambiguous that there is no logical explanation for the lack of effective security countermeasures at the East Beirut annex to thwart such an attack.